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A PLACE TO START.

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DESCRIBED ARE THE EFFORTS OF THE EAST HARLEM COMMUNITY AND A NEW YORK CITY PHILANTHROPIST TO REOPEN THE EAST HARLEM NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY CLUB, A STORE-FRONT CENTER PROVIDING STUDY FACILITIES, HOMEWORK HELP, AND INSTRUCTION IN BASIC SKILLS. THE CLUB IS STAFFED BY VOLUNTEERS AND PAID PROFESSIONALS, WITH ADDITIONAL HELP FROM VISTA AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH CORPS. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "SOUTHERN EDUCATION REPORT," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 9, MAY 1968. (NH)

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A PLACE TO START

In New York's "worst block," people worked to save the study club

By Bernard Bard

On a corner in East Harlem that the papers called "the worst block in New York," a neighborhood study club set up in a storefront had to close its doors a few years ago for lack of funds. Children still kept coming around to peer through the glass door and stare longingly at the deserted desks inside.

The parents and other people of the community in the midst of Spanish Harlem's "El Barrio," with problems of crumbling slums, unemployment and many families dependent on welfare assistance, rallied to save the little study group.

The hot-dog man on the corner, Isidores Panteleros, pledged $20 a month to help reopen the East Harlem Neighborhood Study Club and to keep it alive for good. Panteleros' stand, at the corner of 100th Street and Second Avenue, was right in front of the club entrance. "I love all the people here," he said. "I love the light from this store on my corner. The children in there learning to read. This is the right way for American kids because it keeps them going the straight way. I see this store as a good place because it makes good American citizens out of our kids."

Parents raised $1,300 with a talent show. People walked around East Harlem wearing buttons that said simply, "SOS," meaning Save Our Study Club. The PTAs of four nearby public schools pooled their treasuries to revive the club. Principals and teachers contributed money. Mrs. Mollie Crozchak, who owned the grocery that became the club, cut back the rent and said she wanted no rent at all until the club got back on its feet.

The message was not lost on Frederick W. Richmond, a Manhattan financier and industrialist, who started the club in 1963 and got it through its birth pangs. He committed his own foundation to more money, and won over other foundations, to come up with a $9,000 bankroll to pay for at least another year's operations.

Dictionaries, encyclopedias, reference books, desks and work-tables were supplied by nearby churches and teachers. The East Harlem Protestant Parish supplied scores of children's books like *Tom Swift*, the *Hardy Boys* and *The Three Musketeers.*

"We had started something that would not die," says Richmond, president and chairman of the board of Walco American Corp., a diversified manufacturing and merchandising firm with seven subsidiaries and 2,000 employes.

"Our study club represented an idea whose time had come – despite predictions that it would never last, that the bookies and junkies would take it over and that vandals would make it rubble."

Two months after the club reopened, the city Board of Education opened its own network of after-school tutorial centers modeled after Richmond's original homework club. There are now 282 such centers, with an annual budget of $3 million.

The U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity took over the entire budget of the East Harlem club in early 1966 to make it part of the antipoverty program. There were block rallies, petition drives and demonstrations at City Hall last summer to get more anti-

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poverty money for more such clubs, but the money was not available.

Richmond, 44, set up two new study clubs in the Bedford-Stuyvesant and Williamsburgh sections of Brooklyn in the fall of 1966. They are in impoverished neighborhoods, and serve children who might otherwise be stumbling their way out of school, to become dropouts or get in trouble with the law.

He believes the study-club idea is a natural for any city where children live in poverty or come to school with a skimpy background in English, such as many of the newcomers from Puerto Rico in New York, or Mexicans coming into schools in the Southwest. Businessmen like himself, he believes, must take the lead in setting them up.

"A homework club or an after-school study center is the best antipoverty investment any community can make," says Richmond. "It costs about $90 a year for each child served. That's a fraction of the cost to the school system for keeping a child back a year, for dropouts, for jails and courts. It can mean the difference betwen a wasted life – at immense later cost to the community in welfare and related costs– and a productive life as a contributing member of society."

The idea originated simply enough. Richmond, whose foundation sponsored the rehabilitation of an entire block in Central Harlem and who headed a

Isidores Panteleros, the hot-dog man on the corner, poses happily with a boy from the block and a well-fixed benefactor from downtown, Frederick W. Richmond.

citizens' committee that saved Carnegie Hall from demolition, was seated at a fund-raising dinner one evening next to a former city welfare commissioner, James Dumpson.

They began talking about railroad flats, a term Richmond was not familiar with. He thought it meant apartments abutting the elevated tracks of the commuter lines that pass through Harlem.

"Railroad flats," said Dumpson, "are what a million people live in in New York City, not just in Harlem, but East New York, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick, Brownsville, and the Bronx. They're the old-law tenements, with a door that opens right into the kitchen, which is also the family recreation room with a radio or TV going day and night. Next, right in a straight line, with not a door or wall between them, is the bedroom fronting on an air-shaft. Then, still in a straight-line, is the living room, which has probably been turned into a bedroom for a boarder or older relative."

"How can a kid possibly do homework in such chaos and crowding, with no place of his own, not a desk or even a kitchen-table he could use without interruption?" Richmond asked.

They frequently don't, said Dumpson, and that is one of the reasons the poverty cycle passes from generation to generation. Richmond asked Dumpson what he thought of a neighborhood study club where kids could come off the streets and study in a place of their own. Dumpson was enthusiastic and said it should have been done a long time ago.

Richmond gave $5,000 a few weeks later to begin a club on the West Side of Manhattan, a few blocks from Central Park. It has since been taken over by the Police Athletic League, and there a hard lesson was learned. The place became too much of a social club, and not a place to work. It was obvious that the reason homework was neglected was that children were lacking in basic reading and arithmetic skills. They needed expert help, as much as a place of their own.

The next club was not to repeat the same mistake. But even before he could set it up, Richmond ran into resistance. An official of the city Housing and Redevelopment Board told Richmond he was out of his senses for suggesting a club at 100th Street and Second Avenue. He said the place would be vandalized out of existence in a month. Only when Richmond threatened to cut off support for other study clubs did the agency agree to co-operate.

The block finally chosen is a neighborhood of decaying housing, with families of 10 or more often jammed into two or three rooms. At one time it was said to have more arrests than any other block in the city. But it also possesses an abundance of church groups, settlement houses, community organizations and PTAs to build on.

Largely through their efforts, a neighborhood that might have been suspicious of just another "do-good" project took to the study club with gusto. In the first few weeks, more than 400 children were signed up. Parents brought in their children to register. They sewed window curtains to keep out distractions from the street. A prizefight trainer who operated a gymnasium down the block came to inspect, and assured the staff of the new study club there would be many "pro-

tectors." Word circulated around the neighborhood there would be no open-season on the little storefront, its teachers, or its pupils. Mr. Panteleros and others became the club's unofficial "guardians."

The club stays open four hours a day, after regular school hours, Monday through Thursdays. Friday is reserved for individual conferences at local schools, involving pupils, their teachers or parents. In summer, there are two-hour double-shifts, running from 9 to 1.

Not only has there been no damage; every library book ever borrowed has been returned. Teachers and principals of nearby schools refer pupils to the club, and in one school a note is attached to the report card of any child failing to be promoted to tell him where to register.

The club not only serves nearby elementary schools (public and private), but word of its existence has spread to Benjamin Franklin High School in Harlem. Students with college potential are sent to the club by guidance counselors at Franklin to have their reading improved. Some children are "charter members" of the club, having started in 1963 and continuing to attend through junior and senior high.

In the four years it has been open, the East Harlem Neighborhood Study Club has scored an average reading gain of 1.2 years for its four-month sessions. To put it another way, the children progressed at three times the normal school pace. Some of the success stories are hard to believe, but they are all verified by the Board of Education's own testing. The board gives the standardized Stanford Achievement Test to each child before and after he has been through the study club.

Nelson C., 14, a "slow" student in seventh grade, was reading four years behind. He was a stutterer, who alternated between days of unbroken silence or rages of hostility. He was a problem case for school psychologists. He came in to sign himself up. In one year he made a five-year gain in reading—and stopped stuttering. By the time he was ready for junior high, he was assigned to a rapid-progress class. He is now reading at 12th-grade level, has passed the exam for an elite city high school, and intends to become a biologist. But for the club, he might well have been a classic dropout case.

Linda D., a Puerto Rican girl who spoke only Spanish, picked up three years of reading ability in five months. She got a scholarship to Hope College, Mich.

Aladdin R., a fifth-grade "nonreader" to whom every homework assignment was a hopeless puzzle, was frightened and withdrawn when he signed up. He was ashamed of his reading block; his self-confidence was destroyed, A great change came over Aladdin once individualized help began. The first 15 minutes of each day were spent in simple conversation to build up his confidence. Gradually he began to come out of his shell and to ask questions. It soon became obvious that he had an excellent memory.

Though supposed to stay only an hour, Aladdin stayed for two or three. When his teacher had finished with him, he browsed through magazines or looked up words in a picture dictionary. In a seven-week summer session, he jumped a year in reading ability, and shows "great potential," says Paul Rooney, director of the club.

The teachers are both volunteers and paid professionals. At the East Harlem club, as well as Brooklyn clubs, they are augmented by people from VISTA and the Neighborhood Youth Corps. Rooney heads a paid staff of five and volunteers such as a stockbroker who comes uptown two afternoons a week when the stock exchange closes; the wife of a world-famous gynecologist; a translator at Metropolitan Hospital a few blocks away; the daughter of an eminent physicist, and other students who want to work as coaches. Phillip D., a top student at Horace Mann School, one of New York's most prestigious private schools, comes in regularly. "He comes in quietly and almost immediately surrounds himself with two or three children whom he coaches with a professionalism that would have made Horace Mann proud," says Rooney.

The children come for several reasons. The atmosphere is relaxed. The teachers genuinely care, and show it. It is a place of order in a life that is often a fight for survival, or sanity.

"We have three rooms," says Vincent D., one of five children. "There is the kitchen. My parents and little sister sleep in one room. I sleep with my brothers in the other. At home I don't have books. And my mother and father, they are Spanish and not yet good in the English language. Here, I can do all my homework and get all the answers right in class."

Virginia A., 9, with bright black eyes, signs the day's register and explains why she is here: "There's no place at home. Besides, the people nextdoor are always screaming and yelling. Not like here. It's *nice* here."

At first it was feared the surrounding schools might resent the club as a reflection of their failures. Then, when the Board of Education opened its own centers, there was apprehension that the club would lose its "customers" to the competition. Both fears were wrong.

School principals in the neighborhood are among the club's loudest boosters. They serve on the committee and help obtain up-to-date reading and arithmetic material. "The club is a place the neighborhood cares about," says Michael Decassare, principal of Junior High School 99. "The people see their little ones cared for and helped."

Routinely, each June, principals notify the parents of poor readers about the club's summer program. Left-back children get a second chance if they make enough progress in the summer session, Many do. "The club is a boon to the schools and the neighborhood," says Mrs. Blanche Murphy, principal of PS 109.

Many children prefer the club to the Board of Education's tutoring centers. In the regular schools, they must stay for the full two-hour session. In the club they can leave when they want. In the board's tutoring center, there is always the stigma of "staying after school" in the minds of some children. They prefer the easy informality of the club, where they are on a first-name basis with the teacher or the coach.

Katherine Sullivan, retired principal of PS 168 and part of the club's neighborhood committee, says: "The board's centers don't allow talking. Children work in groups on assigned topics. Here at the club the children have a place of their own, and this is terribly important to a child who has never had it. They can go when they please, talk quietly, eat a candy bar or nibble potato chips. Some children who went to the tutoring centers didn't like it and then came here."

East Harlem's needs are enormous, and the club is only a small drop. The neighborhood elementary schools send only a handful of children into special progress classes in junior high. In 1965, only eight children from the "Metro North" section around the club went into junior-high-school reading at grade level. Three out of four East Harlem children are behind two or more grades when they leave sixth grade.

"It is a trend that must be reversed," says Richmond, "in East Harlem—and every East Harlem in the nation."

Every year, 3,800,000 Americans reach the age of 18. At least 1,200,000 of them will be dropouts—with the casualties greatest in the inner-city schools serving children of poverty. Ten per cent of these dropouts will become chronically jobless.

The "homework club" or "study club" is one way to rearrange the odds slightly in favor of these educational castouts.

"In a world where only 'squares' do homework, we gave children a place where it was right to be square, a place where they had confidence they were doing the proper thing," says Mrs. Helen Cintron, community liaison worker for the club.

Richmond believes business and civic leaders around the nation owe it to their own communities to set up such clubs, in partnership with local schools.

"It is up to citizens at every level—in government and out—to help children who have been mis-served by schools or society or both," he said. "There is no better place to start than a corner grocery store, or an empty tavern, or an unused shoeshine parlor, or a vacant real-estate office." ○